Learning from Others

All the studying and analysis in the world cannot compare to real-life experience. That is what the Wellesley School Building Committee (SBC) sought in touring ten high schools over the summer. The objectives were to view multiple designs and to evaluate and contrast partial renovation/addition projects to new construction projects.

Deciding Renovation vs. New

First, we looked at the decision processes the towns followed. Each had weighed numerous options, which included renovating and adding on versus building an all-*new* facility. The results varied based upon current facility condition and layout, land availability, enrollment forecasts and cost. The towns weighed what they were willing to forgo during construction (such as parking and/or athletic fields) and tolerate during construction (e.g., temporary rooms, modular classrooms, long trailer-like corridors crossing over construction, relocating a grade to a different site, or a remote auditorium).

For example, ***Whitman-Hanson*** reported that its data showed that building new would be less expensive than renovation. It also enabled ***Whitman-Hanson*** to incorporate a "green" design and become a pilot project for the Massachusetts Green Schools Initiative. ***Woburn's*** cost analysis was similar, and they had been concerned by other high school renovations which they felt were unsuccessful. To pay tribute to the historical architecture of their original high school, ***Woburn*** saved key elements from the 1906 school and incorporated them prominently into the new facility. Other schools that opted for all new construction did so because they were not able to find an appropriate renovation design that could upgrade and integrate the multiple additions that had been added to their original structure.

Boston Latin, Reading, Salem and ***Brookline*** included renovations ranging from minor to gut-renovation with additions. ***Brookline*** designed a new section in front of the former front door as a clever way to preserve the original entry. ***Reading*** demolished one building, gut renovated other major sections, added on a building and then connected it all with ramps and hallways. It was readily apparent that the level of "renovation" can take many forms and that the associated costs vary significantly.

Facility Layout

We assessed how each school was organized and how it functioned (or not) and the resulting "feel" of the facility.

A common design focus, primarily in new construction, is on the "heart" of the school so that when you enter the primary door, you immediately *see* major functions: the front office, a public gathering space, a 2nd floor library, the auditorium entrance, and a connection to the gym. You *feel* you have stepped into the heart of the community and can *see* what makes this a school. The visual balance of academics, arts, and athletics is powerful.

Connections to the outdoors are an equally significant goal. ***Ashland*** has a courtyard bound by four walls that looked barren and hot. The more successful outdoor spaces tended to extend from interior spaces – often via glass and multiple doors.

Almost every school sought to increase town-wide use of the high school facility. Although planned for in initial designs, actual use proved to be consistently greater and more enthusiastic than anticipated. A few schools included a TV studio, used and funded by the local cable station. ***Swampscott*** built an entire senior citizen center adjacent to its cafeteria.

Site as an Issue

As our own site is tight, we paid particular attention to verticality. Most facilities were two- to three-stories. ***Woburn*** designed a four-story facility, which worked well; most notably, they incorporated large open stairwells that enable light to enter. At ***Swampscott***, SBC members were impressed by the creative cafeteria design, effectively positioning it underneath the gymnasium.

Distinctive Finish

Choices of materials, as well as the quantity of glass used, make up the "*finish*," giving each school a distinctive look. *Finish* is an integral part of design affecting facility durability and cleanliness. For example, wood trim in combination with minimal natural light in the hallways made one building feel dark and difficult to navigate. At ***Bridgewater Raynham***, natural light flowed throughout: from operable transom windows to the corridor, sidelights, skylights, and corner stairwells with wide views to the landscape. All provided ventilation and made the building feel open and bright.

These are just examples of the vast amount of information we gathered during our site visits. Taken in total, our findings will greatly increase our ability to effectively evaluate the options for Wellesley High School.

The SBC will show and discuss photos from the school tours and SBC progress to date on October 2nd, 2007 at 7:30 p.m. in Great Hall at Town Hall. The public is welcomed to attend.

For more information on the SBC or the High School Project go to www.wellesleyma.gov and click on School Building Committee.

Cynthia Westerman is a member of the SBC. She also served on the FAC and Program Review Committees for WHS. Cynthia works full time as a Project Manager for private school capital projects. She and her husband have three children in the WPS, and their Seaver Street home neighbors WHS.